

To: Washington Learns Steering Committee
From: Washington Learns Early Learning Council
Re: Proposed Recommendations for the November 2005 Interim Report

The legislation that created the Early Learning Council (HB 1152) charged the Council with making recommendations in 2005 about the statewide organization of early learning and the preliminary design for a system of quality ratings and tiered reimbursement. This memorandum responds to those requirements, provides a summary of our rationale, vision and goals, and recommends a bold new approach to early learning in Washington State.

RATIONALE FOR THE EARLY LEARNING COUNCIL'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Washington State's best opportunity for competitiveness and distinction in the global economy is by creating a world-class education system that starts early and supports life-long learning.¹ This system will include the infrastructure for a high quality, affordable and accessible early learning system that embraces the "whole child," goes beyond "ready-for-school" and responds to the diverse needs of all families and young children in communities throughout our state.

Research across many disciplines now tells us that what happens in the earliest years makes a critical difference in children's readiness to succeed in school and in life. The data are clear and compelling; the first months and years are critical opportunities, not just for learning, but also for helping every child have the kind of positive attachments that make life-long differences in citizenship and the ability to care about other people. That research also makes it clear that high quality early learning experiences are among the very best investments we can make in reducing future costs associated with special education, abuse and neglect, health care, school drop-out, teen pregnancy, welfare and the criminal justice system.

And, while parents are their children's first and most important teachers and decision-makers, all parents face challenges in meeting their children's early learning needs, and can benefit from support. This includes the large proportion of parents who now work outside the home. Many families do not know where to turn for help and face affordability and other barriers in trying to access high quality early learning services.

Historically, Washington State was a leader with its early implementation of state pre-kindergarten services through the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program or

¹ Rolnick, Art and Grunewald, Rob, *Early Childhood Development; Economic Development with a High Public Return*, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, January 24, 2003. <http://minneapolisfed.org/pubs/fedgaz/03-03/earlychild.cfm>

ECEAP, and was rated among the top ten states for the quality of its child care program. In recent years, we have fallen behind other states in our support for early learning. Many children do not receive high quality early learning services, standards are lacking across types of programs, and early learning providers lack the supports and incentives needed to improve the quality of services they provide.

The proposed infrastructure for early learning will support parent involvement and education. It also includes a streamlined and stable approach to governance and finance; partnerships between the public and private sectors; broad-based community education and dissemination of information about the importance of early learning; and incentives and supports for families, providers and teachers to continuously improve the quality of early learning opportunities for all young children.

THE EARLY LEARNING COUNCIL'S RECOMMENDATIONS ARE GUIDED BY THE FOLLOWING VISION AND GOALS FOR EARLY LEARNING:

Vision: To create a sustainable, integrated and accessible early learning system that provides parents, families, caregivers and communities in Washington State with the information, support and services to ensure that every child is prepared from birth for success in school and life.

Goals: That Washington's young children live, play and grow in safe, nurturing environments and:

- Parents are supported as their children's first teachers and primary decision makers and have an array of early learning choices including family, friend and neighbor care;
- All children, including children with special needs, are ready for school and schools are ready for children;
- Early learning teachers, including family, friend and neighbor caregivers, receive adequate compensation, and have training and support to help children be school ready;
- Appropriate public and private finance, support, and engagement exist;
- A public-private partnership coordinates, provides incentives and measures movement toward higher quality care;
- The importance of quality early learning has widespread public recognition and support including in the workplace;
- The system recognizes that success may be defined differently across communities, and promotes inclusion and support to each child and family's culture and needs;
- Essential coordination and collaboration is supported and effective across early learning services and with K-12 and Higher Education, family services, health services, tribes and others at the federal, state and community levels; and

- The system is accountable for appropriate measurable results (outcomes are measured for children, families, organizations, and the system).

THE EARLY LEARNING COUNCIL RECOMMENDS A NEW EARLY LEARNING SYSTEM THAT INCLUDES THREE MAJOR COMPONENTS:

1. A public-private partnership focused on public engagement and quality improvement.

The Public-Private Partnership recognizes that philanthropic organizations and businesses in Washington State currently support early learning efforts and are poised to do more—particularly in efforts to improve the quality of early learning services. The Public-Private Partnership will create the framework for acknowledging the commitment of individual partners to early learning and challenge new partners to join the Partnership as “founding partners” in support of high quality early learning.

As a first step, the state will work with the Partnership to develop a coordinated public outreach campaign that will target various audiences with messages about the importance of early learning. The campaign will start by asking parents, community leaders, educators and others across the state about the supports families want or need, as well as the early learning needs of young children. The second step will be to establish a Partnership fund to support high quality early learning services and supports for parents, families, teachers, providers and communities.

2. A cabinet-level department of early learning with a director appointed by the governor.

Consolidating management of child care and early learning programs in a single agency will demonstrate the state’s commitment to greater priority and visibility for early learning, to reducing fragmentation among programs, and to increasing the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of early learning programs.

The purposes of the new department will be to:

- Support the state’s vision and goals for a sustainable, integrated and accessible early learning and care system that prepares each child to succeed in school and in life;
- Enhance parent and family education, supports and early learning choices;
- Improve continuity of care and the transition of children from early learning and school-age care to K-12;
- Support the stability and quality of the early learning workforce with incentives and supports for training and education; teacher credentialing and certification; smooth transitions from one level of education to the next; and appropriate compensation and benefits;

- Provide supports and incentives for quality improvements linked to the Quality Rating and Improvement System;
- Consolidate and coordinate funding streams;
- Develop a seamless early learning service delivery system with local points of entry and coordinated eligibility standards and policies (including reimbursement rates and payments);
- Establish standards and guidelines across programs;
- Streamline licensing, accreditation and monitoring requirements; and
- Develop and manage an effective data collection system.

The Early Learning Council recommends creation of the department of early learning effective July 1, 2006. **The department will serve as the lead agency for the administration of public and private early learning services. Parent education and support, child care, and early learning programs (and funding streams) that are consistent with the mission of the new agency will be included in the new department. The department will initially include:**

- Child care subsidies (including those provided to school-age children);
- Child care licensing (including school-age care programs and tribal certification);
- Quality activities such as resource and referral, STARS (provider training and registry) and other activities designed to improve the quality of early learning services;

The Head Start-State Collaboration office; and

- The Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program.

The Early Learning Council recognizes that there are programs in addition to those listed above that provide parent education/support and early learning services. However, further study is required to fully understand the implications of moving these programs to the new department. We recommend that the new department, in consultation with the Early Learning Council, make recommendations about the transfer of these programs to the new department. These recommendations will be included in the final Washington Learns report.

Absent substantive reasons for their exclusion, the Early Learning Council recommends the following programs for inclusion in the new department:

- Family support services and parent education;
- Health services such as First Steps and Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies;
- Child care health consultants;

- The Child and Adult Care Food Program;
- Infant and Toddler Early Intervention Program;
- Early Childhood Special Education;
- Even Start/Family Literacy; and
- Child care assistance provided to special populations.

Also in consultation with the Early Learning Council, we recommend that the new department make recommendations concerning:

- *Coordination and collaboration* between the new department and the K-12 system at the state and local levels to ensure appropriate connections and smooth transitions between early learning and K-12;
- *Ongoing coordination and collaboration* between the new department and other programs not included in the new agency;
- *Ways the new department will support local communities* in encouraging public-private partnerships, innovative solutions to local issues, coordination of early learning services, and improved transitions from early learning to kindergarten; and
- *The relationship between the new department and the Public-Private Partnership.*

3. Development and implementation of the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) and System of Tiered Reimbursement.

The preliminary design for the QRIS, linked to quality incentives and Tiered Reimbursement, has been developed by a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) of the Early Learning Council and endorsed by the Council. Attached is a summary of the approach proposed by the TAC.

The QRIS will provide clear steps, supports and incentives for early learning and school-age providers to increase the quality of services they provide. The program ratings will provide parents and communities with information about the type and quality of programs that are available in their communities. The ultimate intent is to improve developmental outcomes for children.

HB 1152 provides that subject to the availability of funds, implementation of the system will begin by March 30, 2006 in two pilot sites in different geographic regions of the state with demonstrated public-private partnerships.